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Research Paper

Empowered yet unequal: exploring the knowledge and attitudes of working women towards economic independence and gender equality

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ABSTRACT

This study describes the women worker's socio-economic profile (SEP), such as age, education, occupation, type of family, marital status, number of children, total family income, and the total number of family members and gender equity. A mixed-method research design was adopted. In the first stage, the quantitative method—the questionnaire method—was used with a pre-prepared sequence of questions to collect the required information from adolescent working women. Second stage, the qualitative method, focus group discussions (FGD), was adopted to collect elaborate responses from the respondents. Likert-type five-point scales have been used for this study. The statistical measures used are mean, standard deviation (SD), analysis of variance (ANOVA), factor analysis, and correlation. Tests of significance have been conducted with the level of significance fixed at 0.05. The correlation results show that educational qualification, marital status, and the number of family members have a significant positive relationship with the knowledge of economic independence. The correlation bivariate analysis shows that adolescent women workers' knowledge of economic independence has a significant positive relationship with attitude towards economic independence, knowledge of gender equality, and attitude towards gender equality. Knowledge and attitude on economic independence have a significant positive relationship with knowledge and attitude towards gender equality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of women in contemporary Indian society has undergone a significant transformation due to increasing participation in the workforce. Yet gender disparities remain in the public and private sphere in the context of increasing educational attainment and participation in occupations. The principle of economic independence, which has become one of the key elements in the process of empowerment [1] is a central issue in the contemporary discussions in the society, politics and academia [2]. This study aims to analyse the knowledge and attitudes of working women on economic independence and gender equality and how much economic participation leads to economic empowerment. In India's traditional roles, women have been placed at a disadvantage under the canopy of traditional norms of the conservative gender system and this has further constrained their roles in family and society. Women are always deprived of autonomy due to their economic dependency on men, lack of decision-making power and societal norms on domestic roles, which are long-standing practices [2]. Legal policies and social policies (Equal Remuneration Act 1976 and Maternity Benefit Act 1961, amended in 2017) have tried to close gender gaps but, in practice, this is often undermined by entrenched cultural attitudes and poor implementation [3]. The relationship of economic independence with gender equality is relevant particularly with the working female women. Despite the fact that studies have proved that having a job doesn't automatically mean having an equal role, employment is seen to offer financial resources, social mobility, and improved self-esteem and decision making capabilities within home and individual relationships [4], [5]. Even though women work, discrimination, wage gap, sexual harassment and dual role of earning and caring towards children/household/daily activities still continues [6], [7].

This is an indication of the need to study nuances in the evolution of knowledge and attitude of empowerment among working women from various socio-economic status. The aim of this study is to explore the thoughts of women in the role on their new and emerging ideas about economic independence and gender equality in their experiences and social participation. It examines how they feel about their rights, their attitudes to conventional gender roles and the nature and extent of their experiences with negotiating power, as related to various socio-demographic traits (including education, marital status, income and occupation). These dimensions are vital to targeted interventions in social work, education and public policy.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

Economic independence is measured as the capacity of a woman to access, control and use the economic resources – such as income assets and employment – that a woman has. The concept of Gender Equality is defined as equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men [8]. These constructions are viewed from a human rights perspective, in particular economic, social and cultural rights [9], [10].

2. RELATED WORK

Economic independence and gender equality have featured prominently in the development agenda across the world, especially that of women in both developed and developing countries. Women's participation in economic activities and decision-making on an equal footing plays an important role in a country's progress as well as the progress of the individual woman [11]. It has been believed that ensuring women's economic empowerment plays an inestimable role in eradicating poverty, development of human capital and household welfare [12].

Economic independence has generally been defined as women's access and control of economic resources – income, property and employability without being financially dependent on others. Although there have been improvements in access to education and employment for women around the world, the gap in wages, the failings to reach leadership positions, and occupational segregation remain. Economic independence comes with agency and dignity to be transformative, as Nussbaum stresses. But women's autonomy is not the same in patriarchal societies where traditional gender roles and economic

independence often coexist in practice. Gender equality, being one of the SDGs, contains sub-objectives aimed at the elimination of discriminatory practices, at equal representation in the economic life and at access to reproductive and health rights [13]. Despite law-provision, culturally entrenched norms and institutional bias generate impediments to progress. According to Ridgeway and Correll, [14] the issue of gender inequality stems from institutionalized expectations which become ingrained in people's minds resulting in women having less confidence, aspiration, and make career choices.

In India, economic growth is not equitable enough to keep all genders on an even footing. The Global Gender Gap Report [15] shows that Women's economic participation and opportunity rank very low in India. Wage discrimination, employment instability, lack of childcare, and double burden (dual workload) are widespread among working women [16]. Other research indicates that working women may internalize gender norms [17], [18] making gender inequalities common, rather than structural. Education, Socio-economic status, media exposure, and parental environment are some important factors that influence the attitudes towards gender equality [19]. Often attitudes towards their own economic empowerment and the role of women are ambivalent, namely when gaining economic independence leads to conflicts within family or conjugal relationships [20].

This conflict - of being empowered economically but constrained socially - is at the very heart of explaining the enduring nature of gender inequality in the face of policy actions. Previous literature has paid little attention to women's attitudes and knowledge and this study extends it to look at the knowledge and attitudes of women working in the society besides structural barriers. It seeks to gain an understanding of what internalized beliefs, cultural expectations and lived experiences mean for women's understanding of their empowerment. The empirical study will be complimented with feminist theory, to give a nuanced understanding of the complexity faced by working women with regard to obtaining true economic and gender parity.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study involves descriptive cross sectional research design, which will be used to examine the knowledge and attitudes of the working women in relation to economic independence and gender equality. If the research examines the characteristics of a phenomenon or population in a systematic way, a descriptive design should be used [21]. This structure allows robust, "snapshot" information from multiple points that are rich in natural, context-based data—and captured at one central place. The descriptive design was chosen over the experimental design for two reasons: (1) it does not alter the natural context in which the attitudes exist and (2) it captures the current level of awareness and perceptions of women in different occupations. The study sets out to provide a grounded understanding of how socio-demographic characteristics correlate with attitudes by pinpointing patterns and making connections between these factors and people's perceptions of gender equality.

The study attempts to offer a grounded understanding of the dynamics between women's work, women's autonomy, and their perceptions of gender equality, by identifying patterns and making connections between the various factors. The research benefits from the feminist epistemology which focuses on the lived experiences of women as valid sources of knowledge, centering women's experience of empowerment and equality, informed by the feminization of experience, such as women's social role in relation to the labor market, gender difference in domestic responsibilities, and gender difference in socio-cultural shifts.

3.2 Sampling Method

Stratified random sampling was done for proper representation of working females of various sectors such as government, private, self-employed and unorganized sector to collect the required data. The stratification was made according to three factors: occupation, educational qualification and type of employment. The number of working female age 21-55 years in the sample population were 934 from urban and semi-urban areas of Tamil Nadu in India. Participants included from a cross-section of

occupations from both urban and semi-urban areas, such as education, health, banking, government, and private corporate. The method resulted in reduction of sampling bias and ensured the variation related to socio-economic, educational and professional background, enriching analysis process. The inclusion criteria comprised that the participants should have been working for one year minimum, have the ability to read and write Tamil or English language, as well as provide informed consent. Through this sampling method, demographic diversity was ensured and also various knowledge and attitude levels based on educational qualifications, socio-economic status, marital status and work experience were captured.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

A semi structured format questionnaire was designed and voluntary answered for collection of quantitative and qualitative information. The questionnaire included three sections: a) demographic data such as age, education, marital status, occupation and income; b) a knowledge section which included questions on economic rights and financial independence, and the laws pertaining to gender equality; and c) an attitude section, which comprised Likert-type items measuring attitudes toward financial autonomy, beliefs regarding women's roles in the household and workplace, as well as obstacles to gender equality. Open-ended questions were used to allow for deeper insight than closed questions to elicit the more subtle nuances. A pilot study with 30 participants was conducted to ensure reliability and validity of instrument. Ambiguous items, quotes and cultural sensitivity were addressed, and alignment to internal structure was achieved through feedback. The attitude scale had a high reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84). Content validation was achieved by having it reviewed by gender studies professionals and social work scholars. The data were gathered during three-month period, both online and offline using interviews and questionnaires, which were made easier and more convenient for the participants. Qualitative responses were analyzed through thematic analysis to capture and identify the most common patterns and narratives of empowerment and gender norms and quantitative responses using SPSS to conduct descriptive statistics, t-tests and ANOVA for group comparisons. Cronbach's alpha was applied to check the reliability of the instrument and acceptable internal consistency was obtained ($\alpha = 0.82$). Content validation was conducted with the assistance of social work educators and scholars on gender issues to ensure the validity of the items, and the items were further reviewed by experts.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Feminist Theory and Empowerment Theory that gives conceptual insight into women's agency related with structural barriers. Feminist theory challenges the patriarchy that reinforces gender inequities and makes considers the socio-political origins of women's oppression. Zimmerman's empirical theory of "empowerment" emphasizes improving people's ability to make choices and exercise some control over their lives. These frameworks inform the focus of the study on the socialization, work context, and cultural influences on knowledge and attitudes, and the effects of economic independence on gender and other factors.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A survey was conducted among 934 working women to know how familiar they are and attitudinal modification on economic independence and gender equality. Findings cover socio-demographic characteristics as well as awareness of rights and attitudes and are statistically reported and interpreted.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Age	**A Significant Proportion (38.2%) were Aged 31–40 Years**
Education	23.6% were postgraduates.
Employment	75.6% were employed in private sectors.
Family Type	63.9% lived in nuclear families.
Marital Status	76.4% were married.

Children	41.4% had two children.
Family Size	67.5% had four members in the family.
Residence	64.4% live in urban areas.

The socio-economic profile of the respondents in Table 1 shows that 38.2% are in the age group of 31-40 years. 23.6% of the working women are post-graduates. 75.6% of the working women are employed in private jobs. 63.9% live in a nuclear family. 76.4% of the working women are married. 41.4% of working women have two children. 34.1% of the working women's total family income is ₹10, 000 – ₹20, 000. 67.5% of the working women had four members in their families. 64.4% of working women live in an urban.

Table 2. Opinion of the Respondents on their Respect for their Rights

S. No	Options	No of Working Women	Percentage
1	Yes	557	59.6
2	No	377	40.4
	Total	934	100

The Table 2 observes that 59.6% of the working women agreed that if our rights must respect, we must respect others' rights. 40.4% do not agree that we must respect others' rights if our rights must be respected. Thus, the majority (59.6%) of the working women expressed that if our rights must respect, we must respect others' rights. Rights-related awareness of working women shows that 64% did not hear or read about the term human rights. 20.2% expressed that social media is valuable for understanding 'Human Rights.' 82.8% are not aware of the term United Nations. 24.8% of the working women's source of understanding about the term United Nations is social media. 63.4% do not know about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 81.6% are unaware of the National Human Rights Commission. 34.9% knew the term the National Human Rights Commission through social media. 80.5% did not know about fundamental rights given in our constitution. 19.3% know about fundamental rights through social media. 59.6% expressed that if our rights must be respected, we must respect others' rights. The study classified knowledge levels based on the arithmetic meaning and standard deviation.

Table 3. Knowledge of Economic Independence

Score Range	Awareness Level	n	Percentage
≥ 48	High	218	23%
48–40	Moderate	492	53%
< 40	Low	224	24%
Total		934	100%

The Table 3 analysis shows that over half of the respondents (53%) demonstrated a moderate level of awareness, indicating a substantial but incomplete understanding of economic independence among working women.

A ranking of attitudes toward economic independence based on total scores yielded the in the below Table 4 shows a strong consensus among women that socio-cultural practices perpetuate economic inequality (89.3%) and that careers (86.1%) empower them. A significant proportion also felt that economic independence may cause disharmony within the family (85%) indicating internalised cultural tensions.

Table 4. Attitude Towards Economic Independence

Statement	% Agreement	Rank
Social and cultural practices lead to economic inequality	89.3%	1
Career builds confidence	86.1%	2
Economic independence creates family conflict	85.0%	3

Sons should take care of elderly parents	84.5%	4
Right to spend salary independently	82.3%	5
Taking care of one's health is a right	81.8%	6
Participation in financial decision-making is essential	81.7%	7
Right to spend without husband's permission	75.9%	8
Participation in cultural life	68.4%	9
Economic independence determines home position	62.0%	10
Dowry enhances women's status	60.3%	11

Table 5 captures some of the most salient messages regarding gender equality that parents should teach gender equality (87.5%), men and women should share housework (86.7%), gender equality helps governance and social change (84-86%) and son preference persists (79.4%). This information indicates that while women may recognize important gender equality issues, traditional patriarchal beliefs still permeate attitudes. Though the answers reflect a deep commitment to equality, his they also recognize the continuing inequality in the workplace.

Table 5. Knowledge of Gender Equality

Score Range	Awareness Level	n	Percentage
≥ 56	High	254	27%
56–50	Moderate	434	46%
< 50	Low	246	27%
Total		934	100%

The coefficients Table 6 emphases that women's knowledge of economic independence varies with independent variables such as Age, Income, Education, and marital status. In this model, the effect of age coefficient B is equal to 0.110, which means that with each one-year increase in age, there is an increase in knowledge of economic independence of 0.110 level. Multiple regression predicts knowledge of economic independence from the working women's age, income, education, and marital status. This independent variable, such as F (4.934) = 13.805, p < .05, R2 = .056. Women's education and marital status statistically significantly predict knowledge of economic independence. P < .05.

Table 6. Coefficient

Coefficient				
Model	Unstandardised Coefficient		Standardised Coefficient	T
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
Constant	86.919	.996		87.231
Age	.110	.284	.013	.386
Education	1.071	.176	.202	6.074
Income	-.167	.255	-.022	-.654
Marital Status	-1.693	.359	-.155	-4.718
Dependent Variable Knowledge of Economic Independence				

4.1 Correlation and Hypothesis Testing

Pearson correlation analysis revealed:

- Age showed no significant correlation with any variable.
- Family income had a significant negative correlation with attitude toward gender equality.
- The number of family members negatively correlated with knowledge of economic independence. Two-way ANOVA and Chi-square tests showed:
- Education and marital status significantly impacted knowledge of economic independence.

- No significant relationship between socio-demographic variables and attitudes toward economic independence or gender equality, suggesting attitudes are more culturally entrenched than demographically determined.

The study reveals moderate level of awareness among working women about their economic and gender rights. Improving the situation of women and their empowerment in economic terms is receiving serious attention, but traditional attitudes like son preference, acceptance of dowry, and valuing the role of a woman in the home remains a factor in shaping women's attitudes. Based on these findings, it is recommended that further targeted education and empowerment programmes are needed, including rights awareness training, legal awareness and gender sensitivity training. Beyond that, there is a continued institutional and familial social norm that must be changed, as indicated by structural inequalities observed despite the education and employment status of young people. As shown in Figure 1 Scree Plot, indicate the descriptive statistics that provide the mean and standard deviations for women's education and income, with attitude on economic independence as a covariate.

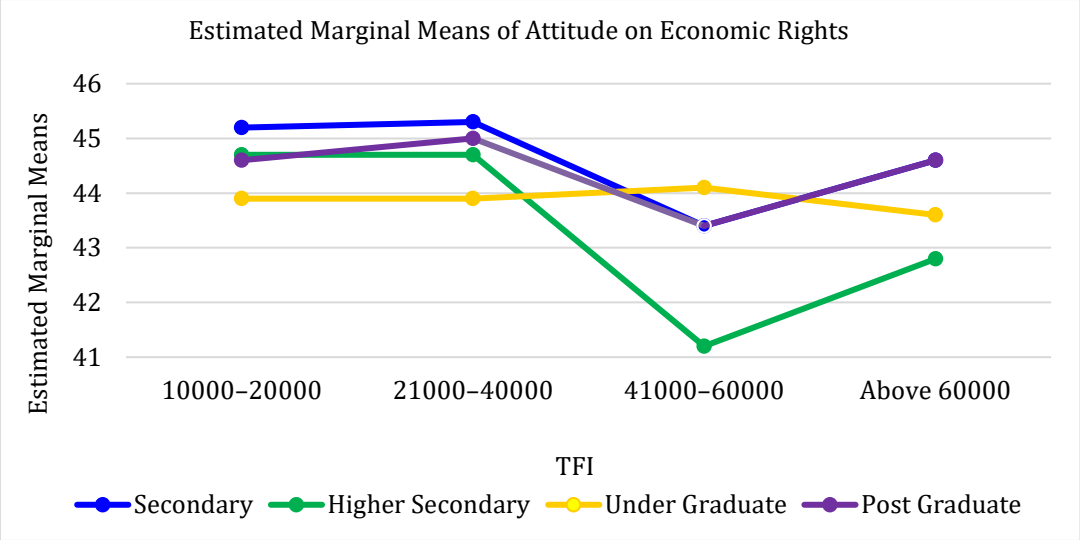


Figure 1. Scree Plot

The descriptive statistics show the mean and standard deviations for women's education and women's income for each level of women's attitude to economic independence.

This study is significant in addressing the dynamics of working women regarding economic independence and gender equality along the Coimbatore district; significant number of empirical inputs have been given to the study. Discussions on the findings revolve around key thematic areas-al key socio-demographic aspects, the awareness and attitude towards economic independence, awareness about gender equality and the existing gender based discriminatory practices.

4.2 Socio-Demographic Patterns and their Influence

Demographic profile of the respondents revealed that majority of the respondents were married, working in private sector, nuclear family. It is crucial for these to be taken into account as they can have an impact on a woman's autonomy and awareness of equality. However, despite the high levels of education among many of the respondents (23.6% postgraduates), there was a low level of awareness about basic human rights and national human rights institutions: 64% had no awareness of the word "human rights", while 82.8% had no awareness of the United Nations. The paradox is that people graduate from primary school, and they are accompanied with awareness of their educational rights, but when it comes to civic rights, they are not necessarily more aware. This will support earlier studies like that of Johnson and Harris [22] on the relationship between occupational status and rights and people awareness, as well as earlier studies on the one hand relating to education rights and awareness of people and on the other hand civic rights and awareness of people.

4.3 Knowledge and Attitudes towards Economic Independence

The study results indicated that most working female population has moderate knowledge about economic Independence and moderate attitude towards economic Independence. Some level of awareness but not enough are active and/or able to participate economically. Crosses in columns like 'Giving equal rights to women in property is necessary' and 'Right to get an education is basic right' were more than 90% for a strong normatively endorsement of these rights. However, a substantial problem arises – with 85.02% of respondents characterizing financial independence as a problem in family life, whilst 86.1% viewed a career as a means to gaining confidence, obviously there exists an ambivalence about financial independence of the women in family life. These attitudes are the result of deep-rooted traditional patriarchal values which see when women are independent, it means that their "traditional roles" are being disrupted. This is supported by qualitative narrative story in thesis. For instance, one of the participants mentioned discriminatory patterns of recruitment due to marital status and pregnancy potential, which is a form of structural violence towards women (Participant I, 36 years of age).

4.4 Gender Equality: Awareness and Workplace Discrimination

In terms of gender equality, 46% of the respondents had moderate knowledge and 52% had moderate awareness of attitudes towards gender equality. The statements that received the highest level of agreement were egalitarian statements like "Parents should teach their children about gender equality" (87.5%) and "Men and women should share household work equally" (86.7%). The proportions indicate a positive level of acceptance of the concept of gender equality, but the actual levels of gender equality in practice are not particularly high. The continuation of patriarchy was also reflected in the responses of, "Taking care of elderly parents is the work of the son, not that of the daughter" (84.5%) and "Dowry increases the status of women in the husband's family" (60.3%). These perspectives reflect internalization of the gender role and social conditioning that remains to be a restraint for the effective achievement of Gender Equity. In addition, workplace discrimination is rife. More than 65% of women reported having lost job opportunities as a result of gender and 66.4% of women confirmed that there is gender discrimination in the workplace. This supports the overall results of global inequality reports including the Oxfam India report which indicates strong wage gaps, role segregation and hiring biases that exists in the Indian market.

4.5 Correlational Insights and Structural Determinants

The statistical analysis provided more in-depth information. Faith for example strongly had a negative correlation with attitude towards gender equality, the higher the family income, the less favorable the attitude. This may be because, for upper class families, a lack of security and status is cloaked in the perceive as privilege of traditional gender roles as seen in families of higher income. Also, more kin in the family was found to be negatively correlated to knowledge of economic independence suggesting women in larger family burden are less likely to gain knowledge because of caregiving responsibilities which affect their autonomy.

4.6 Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of these findings have implications for policy makers and practitioners. Some topics covered the role of socialization, family role and economy factors on the formation of knowledge and attitudes, which goes in line with the argument presented in the study. Therefore, any intervention should be multi-dimensional as it need to address the structural inequities as well as the internalized ideologies. The findings call for increased measures to enhance gender-oriented education and awareness programs, particularly on legal rights/entitlements in the workplace. Strengthen legislation to guarantee equality and anti-discrimination conditions in the workplace. The inclusion of fathers and families in gender equality processes to challenge the norms around masculinity and women's role within families [23] Institutions to embed the promotion of women rights & gender studies in curriculum studies to ensure that all students are made sensitized from an early age. In addition, NGOs and social work specialists should take the

initiative to closing the knowledge gap in the society by organizing the workshops and create support systems at community level particularly for women in private and informal sector [24].

5. CONCLUSION

This study on working women's knowledge and attitudes towards economic independence and gender parity provides an important window into the intersection of the persistently lived lives of women working and societal expectations of gender equality and economic independence in India. Data shows that although the education of women and involvement in employment has made an advance, they remain subject to huge challenges that are social, cultural and institutional in nature which hinder their full realization of their rights. The results highlight a contradiction: women may be theoretically proponents of equality and independence, but gender norms and systemic discrimination get belched up in their bodies. The majority of the women in this study said they were moderately aware of their rights, and moderately supportive of gender equality. But many remain wed to gendered family roles, tolerating discrimination like dowry and facing workplace exploitation and bias.

The study also showed that certain demographic issues like marital status, family size and income has been affecting on these attitudes and levels of knowledge. These insights coincide with the recognition that a fundamental remediation of gender inequality should be viewed not as a problem but as a structural and systemic challenge that is part of the economic, social and cultural landscape of society. When progressive values and traditional constraints are coexistent, any genuine attempt to reach gender parity has to engage both visible and invisible forces impeding patriarchy. In this sense, the social worker, the teacher and the policy maker have to work together to conceive transformative strategies which will enable women to be empowered by making it popular both economically and socially, politically and psychologically.

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the study observation and literature, the following multi-level recommendations have been made for promoting gender equality and enhancing economic independence of working women: Even amongst the highly educated working women people; the knowledge about basic human rights, National Commissions, and International organizations, such as the UNMC, remain low. Awareness programs and community outreach initiatives need to be initiated to increase awareness of women regarding their rights as enshrined in the Constitution and in international conventions (e.g. CEDAW). Make available information on institutional supports like National Commission for Women and labor laws. The study found that there were a lot of reported signs of gender discrimination and few opportunities for professional mobility, resulting from gender based stereotypes. It is recommended that gender sensitization be taught for all employees of the organization specifically the private sectors. HR human resource departments are required to have an open and fair hiring/promotion/company maternity policy. Social workers have a strong role in alleviating the personal/social and structural issues women encounter. Support groups and peer counseling, as well as legal aid camps, can offer a secure forum where women can speak up about their issues and get justice. Social workers should promote gender equity policies at the community level and work with NGOs to offer training sessions addressing life skills, financial literacy and leadership.

5.2 Final Reflection

This study concludes that there is a call to act based on its findings. They are challenging institutions, families and individuals to see gender equality as an essential component of national development and human rights. With India's continued economic growth, it will be crucial to provide a space for women to make progress in an inclusive and sustainable manner, through supportive and informed architecture. Withdrawing the information from the abstract, the rights from the unrealized, the steps that take knowledge to action, remains the grand challenge of all educators, practitioners and policy makers.

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Author Contribution Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
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Dr. Emmanuel Janagan Johnson	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

C : **C**onceptualization
M : **M**ethodology
So : **So**ftware
Va : **Va**lidation
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis
I : **I**nvestigation
R : **R**esources
D : **D**ata Curation
O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft
E : Writing - Review & **E**diting
Vi : **Vi**sualization
Su : **Su**pervision
P : **P**roject administration
Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition

Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflict of interest in this study.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Ethical Approval

Ethical considerations were strictly followed. Ethical approval was obtained from the University Ethical Committee.

Data Availability

Data is available on request.

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